The Oxford Handbook of the Abrahamic Religions, edited by Adam J. Silverstein, Guy G. Stroumsa, and Moshe Blidstein

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The Oxford Handbook of the Abrahamic Religions

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The "Handbooks" genre has witnessed a literal explosion over the past decade, for a variety of reasons many of which unrelated to scholarship proper. "Handbooks" may affect scholarship, however, in the way they identify concepts and highlight potentially meaningful research fields. The volume under review opens with a clear statement: "The primary aim of this book is to contribute to the emergence and development of the comparative study of the Abrahamic religions." (xiii) The book (henceforth abbreviated OHAR) is a witness to the three editors' commitment to this process: Stroumsa, professor emeritus in the History of Religions at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, held the first professorship for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions at the University of Oxford between 2009 and 2013. He has published a number of studies in which he presents his approach to "Abrahamic religions" (and to the very concept of "Abrahamic religions") as a historian of Late Antique religion\s (see, e.g., Stroumsa 2011, 2015, 2017). Silverstein had directed the Abrahamic Religions in History Program at King's College, London, and was a lecturer in Near Eastern Studies at Oxford when OHAR was conceived; he now teaches Islamic history at Bar Ilan University and Shalem College, Jerusalem. As for Blidstein, a former student of Stroumsa's with special expertise in Early Christianity, he was a postdoctoral fellow at the time of editing and is today a member of the University of Haifa's Department of History. That a project devoted to the "emergence and development" of a field should be steered by three scholars representing different generations seems most appropriate.

This said, what field are we considering? The label "Abrahamic religions" generally includes Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, each of which is taken as "one religion" among three and as a member of an extended family. "What brings the Abrahamic religions together is a common set of questions about God and his world; what distinguishes the Abrahamic religions from each other are their respective answers to these questions." (xv) This bold statement does not necessarily imply that each religion has only one answer to a given question; but the arrangement of the three as members of one family tends to keep inner diversity, competition and controversies at the background of scholars' attention, whether on purpose or not. Moreover, conceiving religion\s in terms of Q&A seems to reflect a primarily theological interest, which is somewhat surprising given the editors' and most contributors' expertise as historians (mostly, of religion\s and their contexts).

Though not a modern invention, the label "Abrahamic religions" is of relatively recent conjuncture. It has been increasingly used since the mid-1980s, and with special emphasis since 9/11/2001, by religious representatives in Western Europe and the U.S. to highlight interreligious activities (sometimes called "trialogue") aiming to reduce tensions between communities of believers and to prevent stigmatization of religious minorities, especially Muslims. To some extent, "Abrahamic religions" is a successor, if not an alternative, to the label "Judaeo-Christian tradition" (on which see Hartmann, Zhang and Wischstadt 2005; Nathan and Topolski 2017). "Abrahamic religions" may well be studied as a religious field (in the sense of Bourdieu) in its own right, a field in which authority is claimed and negotiated, religious experts positioning themselves both as spokespersons of their respective constitu-

encies and as responsible citizens committed to tolerance in multicultural societies. One can ask whom that game includes, excludes and concerns, who prefers not to take part in it, and for what reasons. Regrettably, OHAR addresses only marginally the present-day context\s of "Abrahamic religions" discourse and its strong religio-political resonances, most explicitly in Mark Silk's valuable contribution on "The Abrahamic Religions as a Modern Concept" especially in the U.S. (ch. 5)[1] and in Malise Ruthven's "Religion and Politics in the Age of Fundamentalisms" (ch. 29). The book's purpose as a whole may perhaps best be summarized as an attempt, by historians and scholars of religion, to enrich (and occasionally, complicate) interreligious conversations through references to various "Abrahamic" configurations in many different historical settings.

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OHAR is divided into six parts, entitled: (I) "The Concept of the Abrahamic Religions", (II) "Communities", (III) "Scripture and Hermeneutics", (IV) "Religious Thought", (V) "Rituals and Ethics" and (VI) "Epilogues". Since it is impossible to mention, let alone summarize all 33 chapters here, I shall single out some which I consider most relevant with regard to the larger question sketched above, that is, how the (to some extent, separate) fields of (contemporary) religion and (mostly, religio-historical) scholarship intersect in this book.

Readers of this journal will of course be aware that "Abrahamic religions" is a contested category; it is also a paradoxical concept of sorts since expectations attached to it by those who use it (whether in religion, politics, or history) can be quickly deceived (or unmasked) once you look at the details. OHAR does not elude the problem. Reuven Firestone (ch. 1) points out very clearly that the figure of Abraham invoked by "Abrahamic religions," rather than bringing family members together for a harmonious gathering, is generally construed in each family member's memory (not least, canonical scriptures) to bolster one's own claim to superior authenticity. Rémi Brague (ch. 6) points to differences in the three religions' conceptualizations of monotheism, Abraham, revelation, sacred books and attitudes how to relate to them.[2] Gil Anidjar (ch. 2) suggests considering "Yet another Abraham", namely one beyond "reduction" to a religious figure; his philosophical musings remain rather vague, however, and regrettably fail to address the social and political functions the *religious* figure, after all, serves in contemporary (religious and non-religious) discourse. Silverstein (ch. 3) explains that the figure of Abraham has been used in two different ways in history, (1) "as a unifier of distinct (even rival) religious communities," and (2) as a motive to recognize the essential comparability[3] of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and to argue that "their adherents should therefore afford each other preferential treatment of sorts" (37), which implies that others will be less privileged. Stroumsa (ch. 4) points to another distinction in the parallel discours-

[1] As the chapter is almost exclusively concerned with "Judeo-Christian" and/vs. "Abrahamic religions" discourse in the U.S., readers in other parts of the world may want to look for supplementation elsewhere. I found it rewarding nevertheless, not least as Silk critically engages with Hughes 2012, whose analysis and genealogy of relevant U.S. discourse on "Abrahamic religions" seems to require historical refinement.

[2] For somewhat similar arguments, see Levenson 2012; Bakhos 2014.

[3] This is not the place to engage in a critical discussion of the very different concepts of comparison and comparability driving "Abrahamic religions" discourse (where emphasis has long been put almost exclusively on family ties and similarities) and critical comparatism in the Study of Religion\s, where comparison does not start from familiarity and requires equal attention to differences. Wittgenstein's "family resemblances" encapsulate both.

es which since the Middle Ages model the three faiths either in terms of "three rings" or "three impostors"; this implies a fourth party, an observer positioning him- or herself at some distance to the family, or outside what Stroumsa calls its "theological triangle". Unsurprisingly learned, Stroumsa's contribution offers a brief but substantial survey of this discourse from the origins of Islam to the present, providing a kind of genealogy to modern-day Abrahamic initiatives and comparative religion.[4] It also highlights an eclipse of Abrahamic discourse in the 19th century, when the fatal distinction of Semitic and Aryan religions took over (see Kalmar 2017).

I shall not got into details regarding the other parts of the book: Part II offers articles on how the relationship between various "Abrahamic" communities would be conceived and regulated in various historical settings, such as "Islamo-Christian Civilization" (Richard W. Bulliet), various parts of the Mediterranean (David Abulafia), or justice and law. In Part III, authors address different ways of reading and interpreting scriptures (one's own and others', chs. 12–15); while in Part IV, the uses, in and by "Abrahamic religions", of intellectual traditions and epistemes (philosophy, theology, mysticism) and disputed issues (monotheism, science and creation, political thought, dualism) are studied comparatively (chs. 16–22). Part IV (chs. 23–29) discusses "Abrahamic" ways to conceive prayer, purity and defilement, dietary law, life-cycle rites of passage, saints and pilgrimage to holy shrines, love…or politics in the "age of fundamentalisms". The plural is well-taken in the last instance though immediately deconstructed: Malise Ruthven argues that "generally speaking the uses of 'fundamentalism' are highly eclectic and lacking in analytical rigour. (…) Despite some family resemblances, fundamentalisms are not really '-isms' at all" (538). Yet his paper demonstrates how much "Abrahamic" fundamentalisms are entangled and that there is no one religion more inclined to or more at risk of producing fundamentalisms than others. As we know, fundamentalisms transcend the "Abrahamic".

I found Ruthven's phrasing "Abrahamic families"(!, 537) definitely refreshing, since it points to the 'internal' diversity of communities, traditions, institutions, doctrines and regimes in the entangled histories of Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions. Let me consider then a methodological point I would have expected to be addressed more frontally in a handbook which, as mentioned above, ambitions to contribute to the "emergence and development" of a whole new field of critical comparative study: As a historian studying entanglements in a *histoire croisée* perspective informed by postcolonial criticism, I can appreciate that the "Abrahamic religions" discourse offers an advantage over religio-historical research that would focus exclusively on one or another tradition: to conceive religions as kins implies that even when you study one of them more closely you cannot understand it properly without considering the others. In the case of what is called "Abrahamic religions", the entanglements are so amply documented that historians of religion\s cannot indeed ignore them. But if the task of studying entanglements is to contextualize and to complicate, it may stand in tension with the comparative exercise, which necessarily requires systematization *and* conceptual separation of the very entities you set out to compare. How should we single out and define these entities in their relation to each other? While we may never completely escape the family metaphor when practicing comparison (not least since Wittgenstein offered it strong credentials), but we should be aware that it has great potential to produce misunderstandings if not lead us astray: Whom will we(!) scholars declare to be the parents, grand-

[4] An essential complement to this genealogy is offered by Dorothea Weltecke in her equally sophisticated and brilliantly informed article on the medieval "discourse of multiplicity" (ch. 11).

parents, siblings, cousins, etc.?[5] More generally, why should "Abrahamic" relatives be more important for our understanding of particular religious formations than neighbours and friends, rivals or foes? Does the "Abrahamic religions" approach sufficiently account for unbalanced power relations in history (and thus in the present as well)? Much like network analysts, historians of religion\s are meant to study situations of documented (actual) contact, relationship, communication and conflict, not ideational family ties *per se*.

I submit that historians of religion\s should consider "Abrahamic" metaphorization exclusively as data for their study of contextualized social discourse. Whenever mobilized in discourse, the imagined figure of Abraham and what has been declared "Abrahamic" in history was meant to perform some work and to serve particular interests. The contributions in OHAR leave no doubt about that. In contrast, "Abrahamic religions" is useless, misleading and thus potentially harmful as an analytical category. It should not, in my view, be allowed to define an academic field of studies, at least not within the limits of the discipline called History of Religions.

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Only two chapters out of OHAR's thirty-three were authored by women, which may have contingent reasons but deserves to be mentioned. Even more conspicuous for a volume on "Abrahamic religions," only one or two authors are Muslims writing from a background in Islamic academic learning.[6] That Tariq Ramadan, at the time professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at the University of Oxford, was invited to offer an epilogue from the perspective of a Muslim theologian (ch. 32)—alongside two others by a Christian and a Jewish theologian—indicates that OHAR is very much the collective outcome of Stroumsa's Oxford residency. In their own way, these epilogues seem to encapsulate this "handbook"'s problematic nature as a scholarly enterprise—however one views the moral legitimacy or sociopolitical utility of "Abrahamic trialogue" initiatives.

Some contributions in OHAR are definitely outstanding and deserve to be widely read. Most readers will pick chapters following their own preferences anyway. Whether the "handbook" as a whole will contribute effectively to the "emergence and development of the comparative study of the Abrahamic religions" as an academic field remains to be seen. In my opinion, it could have engaged more in the critical disentanglement of scholarly analysis from the religious field, its object of study. The book does not address clearly enough the politics which produce current "Abrahamic" scholarship, nor does it articulate the costs of an exclusive focusing on the three "Abrahamic religions" for the History of Religion\s as a discipline, both in terms of historical and theoretical accuracy.

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[5] Firestone mentions in passing that "Abrahamic religions" could well include Baha'is, Latter Day Saints and Yazidis (3) and others; but their appearance in the book remains incidental, and they did not make it into the volume's index either. The editors explain in a footnote that "in order not to further complicate what is an already complex picture, we have asked our contributors to focus on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam" (xiii).

[6] Cf. Bristow 2017 for attention to "Abrahamic" discourse in contemporary Turkey.

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